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ABSTRACT

The basis on which mentors select proteges was investigated, using suggestions found in the literature on mentoring. Actual and perceived similarity and contrast within the mentor pairs was examined. Attention was also directed to similarity to an imagined ideal pair opposite and the accuracy of interpersonal perception. Measured characteristics and perceptions of each other were compared for 50 pairs working together in a variety of organizations and functions. Participants described themselves, the pair opposite, and an ideal employee (mentors and nonmentors) or an ideal superior (protege and nonproteges) by marking which adjectives on a list of 300 applied to the persons being described. Results did not support the common assertion that mentors pick proteges like themselves. Mentors and proteges were not similar in measured personality characteristics or background factors. Further, mentors did not perceive greater similarity between themselves and their proteges than nonmentors saw between themselves and their subordinates. However, proteges described their mentors as more similar to an ideal superior and more similar to themselves than did nonproteges. The question of what attracts the mentor to the protege is unanswered, but two possibilities are suggested. (SW)

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INTERPERSONAL PERCEPTIONS IN MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS

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Abstract

This empirical study tested several suggestions in the mentoring literature for the basis on which mentors select proteges. Actual and perceived similarity and contrast within the pairs was examined. Similarity to an imagined ideal pair opposite was also tested. In addition, accuracy of interpersonal perception was examined. Measured characteristics and perceptions of each other were compared for 50 pairs working together in a variety of organizations and functions. Statistical procedures used were power analysis, F-tests for significance of differences between groups and Q-mode factor analysis. Results did not support common suggestions in the literature for the basis for the mentor's selection of a protege, but did indicate one possible reason those suggestions have been advanced.

INTERPERSONAL PERCEPTIONS IN MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS

Mentoring relationships have been compared by a number of authors (e.g., Phillips, 1977) to falling in love. Like love, the chemistry leading to specific combinations of individuals in a mentoring relationship is unclear. Suggestions in the mentoring literature for the basis of attraction between the particular individuals are varied and sometimes conflicting. These suggestions include similarity, contrasting characteristics and recognition of ability.

Mentoring has been described in recent literature as an improtant relationship in the personal and career development of adults (Dalton, Thompson & Price, 1977; Kram, 1980; Phillips, 1977; Queralt, 1981; Roche, 1979; Zaleznik, 1977). It is a relationship in which a person of greater rank or expertise teaches, counsels, guides and develops a novice in an organization or profession. Mentoring is describes in the Dictionary of Occupational Titles as the highest and most complex level of functioning in the people-related skills.

Many authors agree that mentors select proteges and groom them for positions of responsibility and power (Baron, 1977; Collin, 1979; Hennig, 1970; Lewin, 1979; McLane, 1080; Zaleznik, 1977), they do not agree on the basis used by mentors in selecting proteges. Nor is research evidence provided by these authors to substantiate the selection criteria they suggest.

Kanter (1977), Kram (1980), Phillips (1977) and Shapiro, Haseltine and Rowe (1978) suggest that mentors perceive a similarity to themselvves in proteges. Kanter (1977) suggests that the reason for selecting a protege who is similar is that in conditions of uncertainty, similarity provides a basis for trust and understanding.

Queralt (1981) and Missirian (1980) report that proteges in their research perceived a similarity between themselves and their mentors, but evidence of the mentors' perception of the

relationship was not investigated in these studies. In addition, actual similarity was not measured.

Interpersonal attraction literature tends to support the suggeston of similarity as the basis for selection. Rand and Wexley (1975) found that biographical similarity accounted for 11.3% of the variance in recommendations for hiring. Labovitz (1972) found that similarity of background between subordinates rated as high promotion possibilities and their supervisors was greater than similarity between other subordinates and supervisors. Results of a survey by Wexley, Alexander, Greenwalt and Couch (1980) indicate that more positive job evaluations by managers are correlated with greater congruence of self perception with perception of the subordinate.

Mentors may select proteges perceived as similar to themselves because, in situations requiring prediction of behavior without full information, they can supply missing details from a fully developed and readily available self-schema. Proteges, in the same way, can supply missing details about a mentor from a self-schemma.

A different suggestion attributes protege selection to recognition of ability and hard work (Bowen, 1982; Collins & Scott, 1978; Hennig, 1970, Thompson, 1976; Zaleznik, 1977). Indirect support for this suggestion is provided by Kelly (1982). He found that those who, during their twenties, had performed one or more highly visible tasks that involved risk and were important to the organization formed mentoring relationships nearly three times as often as as those who did not perform visible, risky, and important tasks. Further, in follow-up interviews with a sample of respondents who had performed visible tasks, 72% said performing the task played some role in the intiation of a mentoring relationship.

Mentors may select as proteges individuals they perceive as high potential employees. Lord, Foti and Phillips (1981) in a theory of leadership categorization suggest that peceivers with limited information call on previously existing prototypes to anticipate the behavior of the stimulus person. In understanding and anticipating the behaviors of mentors, proteges may use their prototypes of a busines leader or supervisor, rather than a self-schema. Mentors may similarly use a prototype of an ideal subordinate rather than a self-schema tc anticipate behavior of proteges.

Only rarely mentioned in discussions of mentoring is the possibility that mentors select as proteges individuals whose characteristics complement their own, those whose strengths offset the mentor's weaknesses. Rather than having similar personality profiles, their profiles would fit together like a jigsaw puzzle.

Not addressed in this research is the question of who initiates the relationship. Queralt (1981) found that mentoring relationships are sometimes initiated by the mentor, sometimes by the protege, and sometimes begin in other ways. The purpose of this study was to determine whether there is evidence to support three of the suggestions in the literature about the basis for interpersonal attraction in mentoring pairs, similarity of

personality or background, contrasting personalities, or perceiving the other person as an "ideal" employee or superior. The research attempted of answer five questions:

1. Are mentors and proteges actually more alike in personality or in background than control pairs, or do they have contrasting personalities?
2. Do mentors or proteges perceive greater similarity to each other than control pairs?
3. Do mentors perceive proteges to be more like themselves or more like an ideal subordinate; do proteges describe mentors more like themselves or an ideal superior?
4. Do mentoring pairs describe each other more like ideal subordinates or superiors than control participants?
5. Do mentoring pairs describe each other more accurately than control pairs in terms of measured characteristics or self descriptions?

Methodology

Subjects

Participation was solicited in evening MBA classes and in meetings of business and professional associations. Volunteers obtained the agreement of the other member of the pair. One hundred individuals in 50 pairs participated: 29 pairs reported a mentoring relationship; 21 pairs not acknowledging a mentoring relationship were the control pairs. Participants worked in a wide variety of professions and organizations. There were 48 males and 52 females.

Instruments

Participants described themselves, the pair opposite, and an ideal employee (mentors and nonmentors) or an ideal superior (proteges and nonproteges) by marking which adjectives on a list of 300 applied to the person being described. The Adjective Checklist (Gough & Heilbrun, 1965) was used for these three descriptions. The Jackson Personality Inventory (Jackson, 1976) was used to measure psychological characteristics, and the Biographical Information Questionnaire (Alleman, 1982) measured background and demographic factors.

Method of Comparison

Actual similarity (question 1) was measured three ways: the number of similar responses on the BIQ; the sum of within-dyad point spread on JPI scales; within-dyad correlations of personality profile z-scores. Perceived similarities (questions 2, 3, 4) were measured by comparing the number of identical responses on lists of 300 adjectives. Accuracy of perception (question 5) was measured two ways. First, comparison of adjectives marked as descriptive of the other person with that person's self description measured congruence of perception. Second, comparison of adjectives describing the other person with that person's JPI scale scores was a three step process. A panel of five licensed clinical psychologists or doctoral candidates in psychology selected adjectives from the 300 on the ACL that, in their judgement, conformed to the JPI scale descriptions (Jackson, 1976). The number of adjectives from each of these lists marked to describe the dyad opposite was entered into a formula that

transformed it to a score that could be compared to JPI scale scores (Alleman, 1982). The transformed scores from the descriptions were then compared to the JPI scale scores of the person being described.

Statistics

Power analysis had indicated that 42 pairs were necessary to distinguish a large difference (.35) between groups with an 80% level of confidence (Newman & Benz, 1979).

Multiple linear regression was used to test variance accounted for. Multiple linear regression was the most appropriate method of statistical analysis since variables in the study were both continuous and categorical (Cohen & Cohen, 1975; McNeil, Kelly & McNeil, 1975; Pedhazur, 1982). The program used involves an iterative solution rather than a matrix inversion. Significance of differences between groups was determined using F-tests (Newman & Benz, 1979).

In addition to these comparisons of means to determine differences between groups, answering question 1 required analysis of profile shape, i.e., comparison of the rank order of a set of variables (Newman, 1971). Q-mode factor analysis was used to develop profiles of personality characteristics. In Q-mode factor analysis, items and subjects are reversed, producing typologies of people (groups of people with similar patterns of response to items) rather than factors (groups of items that people respond to similarly). Development of these profiles allowed grouping of people with similar personality profiles (Newman, 1971). To determine how similar the shapes of different profiles were, the scores making up the profiles were transformed to z-scores and correlations were computed (Newman, 1971).

Results

Question 1. Mentoring pairs are no more alike in measured personality or background than control pairs. As shown in Table 1, there are no significant differences between groups on background factors or within pair similarity of JPI scale scores. Table 2 indicates that within pair similarity of personality profiles is not greater in mentoring pairs. When z-scores of personality profiles were correlated, the mean of correlations of within mentor-protege pairs was .39 while within nonmentoring pairs it was .51. Further, 47% of the nonmentor pairs had correlations above .50 while only 41% of the mentor-protege profiles had correlations over .50.

An alternate suggestion, that mentors choose proteges with characteristics that are opposite to their own is also not supported. Table 2 indicates that negative correlation is rare and low.

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Enter Tables 1 and 2 about here.

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Question 2. Mentors do not perceive greater similarity between proteges and themselves than control superiors see between themselves and their subordinates. As shown in Table 1, they did not use the same adjectives to describe themselves and their proteges more frequently than control superiors did in describing

themselves and their subordinates. By contrast, as Table 1 shows, proteges did describe their mentors in the same terms they described thenselves more often then nonproteges describing themselves and their superiors. This difference in perceived similarity accounts for 8.5 percent of the variance between proteges and nonproteges ($p=.04$).

Question 3. Both mentors and proteges perceive each other as more like an ideal subordinate or superior than like themselves. Table 1 shows that 4.7 percent of the variance between perceived similarity to an ideal employee rather than to self is accounted for ($p=.10$) and 5.3 percent of the variance between perceived similarity to an ideal superior rather than to self is accounted for ($p=.08$).

Question 4. There was no difference between mentors and nonmentors in how closely their descriptions of the other person in the pair resembled their descriptions of an ideal employee. Proteges, on the other hand, perceived their mentors as more closely resembling an ideal superior than nonproteges with 9.9 percent of the varience accounted for ($p=.02$).

Question 5. There was no difference between groups in the accuracy of descriptions of each other compared to measured personality characteristics or in congruence of descriptions of the other person with the other person's self description.

Discussion

The commom assertion that mentors pick proteges like themselves is not supported by the results of this study. They are not similar in measured personality characteristics or background factors. Further, mentors do not perceive greater similarity between themselves and their proteges than nonmentors see between themselves and their subordinates. While mentors describe their proteges as more like an ideal employee than like themselves, the same thing is true of nonmentors. The only difference between groups was in the perceptions of proteges and nonproteges. Proteges described their mentors as more similar to an ideal superior and more similar to themselves than nonproteges. Evidently proteges idealize their mentors and identify with them. They see a similarity to their mentors that neither exists nor is perceived by the mentor. Earlier studies reporting "similarity" of mentors and proteges were based on protege reports of the relationship and did not include the perceptions of the mentor or independent measures of similarity. Results of this study, while consistent with the earlier research on proteges' perceptions, suggest that those perceptions may not be accurate.

Unanswered is the question of what attracts the mentor to the protege. Two possibilities are the behavior of the protege or the talent and/or ability of the protege, two variables not measured in this research. Are proteges, in fact, more intelligent, capable, or skilled than nonproteges? Do proteges do certain things that attract mentors? If so, what? Kelly's (1982) research suggests one possible action: a highly visible task. Two fruitful areas of research might be the behaviors of proteges compared to nonproteges and the independently measured ability and potential of those groups.

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Table 1

Perceived and Measured Similarity within Dyads

Questions:	Variance Accounted for	Sign.
1. Are mentoring dyads more similar than nonmentoring dyads on:		
a. Reported biographic factors?	3%	NS
b. JPI sub-scale scores	0.8%	NS
c. Personality profiles?	See Table 2	
2. Do mentor-protege dyads use the same adjectives to describe each other more often than control pairs?		
a. Mentors and nonmentors	1.2%	NS
b. Proteges and nonproteges	8.5%	p=.04
3. Do mentor-protege dyads describe each other more like themselves or more like an ideal employee or superior?		
a. Mentor: ideal employee not self	4.7%	p=.10*
b. Protege: ideal superior not self	5.3%	p=.08*
4. Do mentor-protege dyads describe each other like an ideal employee or superior more closely than nonmentor dyads do?		
a. Mentors and nonmentors	0.1%	NS
b. Proteges and nonproteges	9.9%	p=.02
5. Do mentors' and proteges' descriptions of each other reflect measured personality characteristecs or self descriptions more closely than nonmentors' or nonproteges' descriptions?		
a. Mentor-nonmentor and other's JPI	0.1%	NS
b. Mentor-nonmentor and other's self descriprion	0.2%	NS
c. Protege-nonprotege and other's JPI	0.6%	NS
d. Protege-nonprotege and other's self description	1.1%	NS

* Alpha for this study was set at .10.

Table 2

Within Pair Correlation of Individual
Jackson Personality Inventory Profiles

	Number above .50	Percent above .50	Mean of Profile Correlations
Mentors	12	41	.39
Nonmentors	10	47	.51
	Number of Negative Correlations	**Percent of Negative Correlations**	
Mentors	1	3	-.12
Nonmentors	2	10	-.12